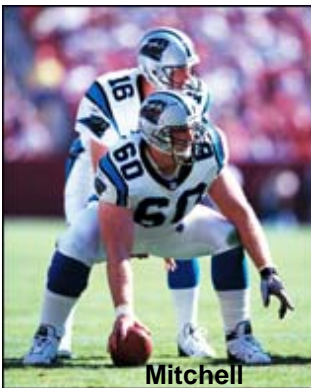


Around the League in Three Pages

Inside this edition:

- Playoff capsules including predictions.
- Post-season award watchlist.
- Rumors on transactions, depth charts, coaching moves and more.

San Diego offensive coordinator **Phil Balogh** is said to be so impressed with newly signed fill-in tackle **Luke Page**'s practices that he's prodding the team to commit to another season to see if he develops...Now that **Todd Pinkston** has a new contract, the **Vikings** have every offensive starter signed through next year... Counting tight end **Mike Seidman**, **Carolina** will have four starting offensive linemen eligible for free agency at year end. Center **Jeff Mitchell** is easily the best but with **Jeff Nelson** in the wings and their cap situation (14 free agents), he may not be back. And despite better play, **Jake Delhomme** still doesn't have the full backing of ownership. Too many old wounds. With that kind of attitude, he may want out.



Mitchell

Getting Dizzy

Atlanta has gone from worst to first and back again and it's getting hard to get a clear view of the team. The 11-5 '05 season surprised everyone following the 3-13 '04 campaign. Now they're fighting **Tampa** to stay out of the cellar.



Insiders in the Big Easy say that the team has already notified representatives of **Joe Horn** that they plan to franchise him. You can bank on him not having the same guy throwing to him though. **Aaron Brooks'** five-interception performance last week cements his role as backup. **Brian Griese** will finish the year. The team has hinted that Brooks won't be back next year but it's not yet certain who they might pursue after this season. The offense showed signs of hope in spots, but Brooks has lost the confidence of the coaching staff. That division is too strong to do nothing.

Shelf Life

Anthony "Booger" McFarland has the **Buccaneer** training staff puzzled and the coaching staff mad. He's injured himself again (broken clavicle now) and the coaches wonder if his off-season routine is too lax. He blames the training staff which blames the coaches. The cycle won't continue much past this season if he can't stay healthy. Management will move him while his value is still high.

Uber-talented DE **Julius Peppers** is being watched closely this year in **Carolina**. His contract is up next year and management may want to deal him rather than renegotiate. FS **Colin Branch**, SS **Mike Minter**, SLB **Will Witherspoon**, and WLB **Brian Allen** the heart of the defense after Peppers are all up next year too...Reports in **Tampa Bay** say that the staff is disappointed in the progress QB **Leo Coppa** has shown this year. Don't be surprised to see them draft or sign a challenger before next season if they can't bring him along soon. Benching **Joey Galloway** in favor of youngster **Blake Grzegorzczuk** was the their next step in his growth...



Galloway

Despite media reports to the contrary, **Ravens** head coach **Mitchell Beyer** says that he's not looking to juggle the starting lineup to correct the declining offensive numbers. They have dropped from the #1 offense to #9.

Award Watchlist

MVP

QB **Marc Bulger**—Rams
 QB **Jake Plummer**—Den
 RB **Travis Henry**—Browns
 QB **Tom Brady**—Patriots
 RB **DeShaun Foster**—Car
 DE **Reggie Hayward**—Den
 RB **Ahman Green**—GB
 WR **Roy Williams**—Lions
 WR **Andre Johnson**—Hou
 S **Shaun Williams**—Giants
 QB **Donovan McNabb**—Phi

Off. Player of the Year

QB **Marc Bulger**—Rams
 RB **Travis Henry**—Browns
 RB **DeShaun Foster**—Car
 WR **Roy Williams**—Lions

Def. Player of the Year

S **Shaun Williams**—Giants
 DE **Reggie Hayward**—Den
 LB **Ronald McKinnon**—Ari
 DE **Tyler Brayton**—Oak

Offensive Rookie

QB **Russell Scanga**—Wash
 RB **Stan Finks**—Detroit
 RB **Cris Ladner**—Dallas
 WR **Jimmie Horton**—Atl
 RB **Jon. McCormick**—Oak
 WR **Antonio Sjogren**—TB

Defensive Rookie

DT **Joe Dunn**—Arizona
 S **Quinn Crum**—Atlanta

Week 13

Baltimore at New England
 Buffalo at Kansas City
 Carolina at Minnesota
 Chicago at Dallas
 Cincinnati at Miami
 Denver at Tennessee
 Green Bay at Philadelphia
 Indianapolis at Cleveland
 Jacksonville at Pittsburgh
 New York (A) at San Diego
 New Orleans at Detroit
 New York (N) at Seattle
 Oakland at Houston
 San Fransisco at Tampa Bay
 St. Louis at Atlanta
 Washinton at Arizona



Newman

For the Cowboys to make a run at the playoffs, they'll need to sit on every wideout they face. Their pass defense covers for suspect ability to stuff the run.

There's no doubt that **Roy Williams** and **Terence Newman** are rock solid in the Cowboy secondary. But the injury to **Donald Mitchell** and **Keion Carper**'s continued vulnerability have the 'Boys looking for some veteran talent. Look for the front office to dangle **Willis McGahee** as trade bait and let **Cris Ladner** and **Julius Jones** split the reps at tailback next year. They recently extended the contract of **Dexter Coakley** but hope to rotate youngster **Bradie James** to the strong side soon. James has been playing the weak side...With **Dan Neil**, **Jake Plummer** and **Rod Smith** all set to become free agents, how will **Denver** bring them all back under the cap? The answer is they won't. Odds are **Smith**, the oldest, moves on...Last year by this time, five defensive ends had been placed on injured reserve. This year **Atlanta** reserve **Demetris Veal** is the only one...**New York** has to feel pretty good about their preseason trade of guard **Rich Seubert**. They got the **Saints'** fifth round pick for him and chose **Lewis Nagurski** who will replace **Shaunard Harts** at safety next year. **Seubert** was recently put on IR with hamstring trouble...**Fred Taylor** is the league's current career rushing TD leader.

Though the defense takes a lot of heat in **San Diego**, the offense is dead last in the league in scoring. If the **Chargers** hope to snap back to competitiveness next year, they'll have to improve the offensive line to give **Philip Rivers** time to throw and **LaDainian Tomlinson** something resembling running lanes...Second-year wideout **Victor Stewart** has earned himself the starting job as the **Bears'** starting flanker after being given the chance to start. He's pleased coaches with his work ethic and has held the job over veteran **David Terrell** rest of the season. And don't take the replacement of their GM to mean anything more than what the league and team has said publicly. The change has less to do with performance and more to do with the previous regime's life outside football.



Stewart

Someone in the **Raiders'** Marketing Dept. should get on the phone with **Paxil**, the anti-anxiety drug. The men in black have come from behind to win in the fourth three times in three weeks. They've outscored opponents 38-7 in the last quarter and OT over that time. The run may be over with **Kerry Collins**, **Danny Clark** and **Derick Gibson** all banged up.

Reunited and It Feels So Good

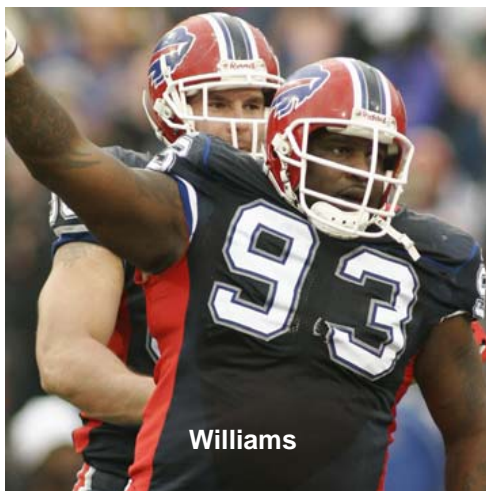
The **Rams** have just about wrapped up their division with a very balanced team. But did you know that three starters and a fourth player that contributes were college teammates? **Orland Pace**, **Rickey Dudley**, **Shawn Springs** and **Terry Glenn** all starred on the 1995 Ohio State team that finished #7 in the country and featured Heisman winner **Eddie George**. DT **Ryan Pickett**, the fifth Buckeye on the team and four years younger, says he went to OSU largely because of that team. The five plan to travel to an OSU bowl game together if their schedule allows.

Is **Fred Beasley** a power back? He's currently averaging over 7 yards per carry... **Baltimore** is taking star end **Marques Douglas'** rehab to mean that his ruptured Achilles is healing faster than planned. But doctors are cautioning the team to avoid letting him play this year if at all possible. Rushing back could have permanent effects on his abilities..No word on whether **Derick Rodgers'** torn ACL will force the **Saints'** star linebacker into retirement. The team has said that at the very least, he'll miss some of next year. He's the clear leader of the defense. If he can't return, look for him to stay with the team as linebackers coach. The injury interrupts a vastly improved run defense that has started stopping the run as well as any team in the league. The recent 6-year extension given to CB **Dennis Weathersby** may indicate where the team feels leadership will come from if **Rodgers** can't return.... **Indianapolis** lost both **Rick DeMulling** and **Langston Walker** in free agency this year, but have to be pleasantly surprised with the play of 2005 2nd round pick **Jimmy Briggs** and undrafted **Joe Iorio** at the guard spots. **Peyton Manning** has only been sacked 11 times this year.



Briggs

Buffalo can look to '07 and the front office has its whipping stick out. Sophomore QB **Clifton Huffman** gets a pass for now, but the coaches won't—especially the defensive staff. The front seven haven't gelled and they show it by starting 3rd round pick **Mickey Carranza** at middle linebacker. The front four need maturity. And to get **Tim Anderson** back with **Pat Williams** at tackle, not end where he's been tried this year.



The two biggest names in the left tackle market this off-season will be **Flozell Adams** and **Ross Verba**. Adams rejected three offers from the **Cowboys** during the preseason and seems to be an obvious candidate for the franchise tag. Verba and the **Browns** have yet to talk, but his return may be more dicey. Linemate **Kelvin Garmon** and QB **Jeff Garcia** both have expiring deals and play roles at least as large as Verba.

The Hunt for Red October, er January—How the Playoffs Could Shake Out

NFC

North—The tightest division in football. At this point it's anybody's game though Green Bay would have the 'been there' factor. They do face a bunch of competitive teams down the stretch, but the Vikings have a 1-3 divisional mark. Detroit has a schedule advantage and great pass defense but is worst in the league in Red Zone scoring. **Prediction: Packers**

South—Carolina continues to win on DeShaun Foster's legs and improved play from Jake Delhomme. Atlanta is feast or famine while Tampa and New Orleans can't get a rhythm. **Prediction: Panthers**

East—The race comes down to stretch play by Dallas. They could easily win every game leading up to the final-week tilt with the Eagles. Philly has a rough schedule but powerful offense. Four of six on the road kill the birds. **Prediction: Cowboys**

West—This was over weeks ago. **Prediction: Rams**

Wild Cards

Minnesota and Philly have to overcome tough schedules. Chicago will fade with a weak running game. Detroit is a good bet to nab one spot while the other two fight it out. **Prediction: Lions and Eagles**

Where We Go From There

New England and St. Louis look pretty dominant and it's hard to see them getting beaten here. Those are the safe bets for the big game. But keep an eye on Houston and Denver in the AFC and the Panthers in the NFC. No division winner will want the Texans in the first round. All three of those teams have the balance to make a run deep into the playoffs.

Peyton Manning could be running his team right into the playoffs if the Colts can keep the offense humming and the defense continues to smother the run. Houston is all that stands between Indy and the post-season.



AFC

North—Baltimore and Pittsburgh have every right to consider themselves part of the race, but Cleveland has the best offense in the division and a defense almost as good as the Ravens'. **Prediction: Browns**

South—Jacksonville has a winnable schedule down the stretch but this race is all about Indy and Houston. These teams are so statistically similar it's scary. Flip a coin. **Prediction: Too close to call.**

East—The Jets wish. **Prediction: Patriots**

West—Oakland is unbeaten inside the division and Denver can score, score, score. A nice race that would be getting more attention if not for Oakland's tie. Denver looked to be a run-away a few weeks ago but the race has tightened. Both teams are good. Go with the winner Week 17. **Prediction: Too close to call.**

Wild Cards

This is much more competitive than the NFC. Six teams could be in the race come the last week. The odd-man-out in the South will be the best Wild Card seed. **Prediction: Jets and South #2**